

From the Outside In: A Place for Indigenous Graphic Traditions in Contemporary South African Graphic Design

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Introduction

This essay makes a case for indigenous African graphic systems as appropriate subject matter for inclusion in a history of graphic design in South Africa. The case study describes the range and nature of graphic systems and, by focusing on one example, demonstrates the integral importance of indigenous systems to contemporary communication issues in South Africa. The relationship between specific traditional symbols from the Zulu culture of KwaZulu-Natal province is examined and compared with the conventionalized version of the AIDS ribbon commonly used in many HIV/AIDS awareness campaigns.

In this case, we revisit the work done by the Siyazama Project,¹ which focuses on HIV/AIDS awareness among rural craftswomen. Its relevance here is that its work also demonstrates the importance of graphic symbols in an otherwise oral community. We also briefly explore the social context in which this campaign takes place to clarify the marginality of this community.

The relationship between communication partners in South Africa tends to be characterized by ignorance of the “marginal” cultures on the part of the dominant and efforts by the “marginalized” to adopt the dominant culture and abandon their own. For purposes of this case study, the closer a community is to the traditional, monolingual isiZulu-speaking,² non-literate, rural, subsistence end of the scale, the more “marginalized” it is considered; the dominant, meanwhile, are the westernized, literate, English-speaking urban populations, regardless of their “racial” origins.

As a profession in the province of Kwa-Zulu Natal, graphic design exists primarily in this dominant section of society, and its history is largely defined by this ethos.³ Thus, both in its contemporary practice and in its history, graphic design in this region, wittingly or not, colludes in this process of marginalization. Such marginalization can only be addressed by designers if they research both the historical and contemporary uses of visual communication among the amaZulu and then integrate this knowledge into their work.

- 1 The Siyazama Project was previously discussed in *Design Issues* (20:2, Spring 2004), 73–89. That article focused on the project’s history and scope, and on the effectiveness of beadwork as a mode of expression.
- 2 As in many African languages, “Zulu” is the root form of the word, and different prefixes specify meaning. Thus, the Zulu language is properly known as “isiZulu,” and the Zulu people as “amaZulu.”
- 3 Graphic design history and research at the Durban University of Technology has recently developed beyond an entirely eurocentric emphasis, although Phillip Meggs’s *A History of Graphic Design* remains the set text. American and British sources generally remain the exemplars for the discipline, and their emphases remain the norm.



Figure 1

Examples of the Ethiopic syllabary, or syllabic alphabet. Characters combine an initial consonant with a vowel determined by the shape and position of a diacritical mark.

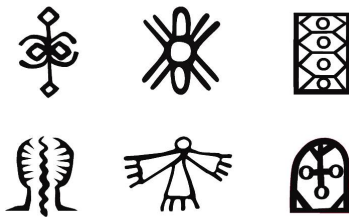


Figure 2

Characters from the first version of the pictographic script produced by the Bamum people of Cameroon in the 1890s. Characters represent, from left to right, top: a white person, truth (representing a spider used in divination), war; bottom: a man under the influence of evil spirits, a large war drum.

The case study concludes by proposing that, as a consequence of this situation, South Africa's graphic design history, or lack of it, calls for the development of a respectful equality of mutual cultural knowledge as a working method for designers, regardless of their cultural power.

African Graphic Systems

Africa is currently home to approximately 2,000 languages⁴ and it is likely that all of the cultures using these languages have had, at one time, some systematic form of graphic communication. In my own research⁵, I have identified over 80 such systems, a figure certainly incomplete. Saki Mafundikwa (2004)⁶ has also written on these systems in the context of the African diaspora in his book, *Afrikan Alphabets*, which I believe is the first such study from a graphic design perspective.

Forms of graphic communication include alphabets and syllabaries, easily recognizable as comparable to those used in European or Indian cultures, as well as collections of less comprehensible symbolic pictographs and ideographs. Examples of the former, such as the Ethiopic alphabet of Christian Ethiopia (Figure 1), were accorded a certain respect by European explorers and colonizers, particularly for religious reasons. Pictographic and ideographic systems, unfortunately, were often misunderstood or rejected as being part of "primitive" cultures, which, in the colonial ethos, were to be either suppressed or "developed." The complex pictographic system created by the Bamum people of Cameroon, for example, was developed into a sophisticated syllabary (Figure 2) before its suppression by the French.⁷

Part of the problem also stemmed from the use of forms or substrates in African graphic communication, which were unfamiliar to colonial-era Europeans: The systems might have been inscribed on wood (carvings), the ground (sand diagrams), cloth, or the human body (as body painting, tattooing, or scarification) (Figures 3 and 4). Because of these dissimilarities, European writers often failed to recognize these systems as texts; nonetheless, they fulfilled that function in their own cultures. The Portuguese explorer, Duarte Lopez, writing at the end of the sixteenth century, refers to Congolese carvings, for example, as "devil's images cut in wood, in all kinds of horrible shapes: many worship winged dragons, others worship snakes as their gods, others again bucks, tigers, or other loathsome and abhorrent animals."⁸

Semiotics provides very broad descriptions of a "text." Barthes describes a text as "a work conceived, perceived and received in its integrally symbolic nature"⁹ and discusses, as examples, professional wrestling, actors' haircuts in a film of Julius Caesar, a new model of Citroen car, and so on.¹⁰ Noble and Bestley broaden the definition even further, identifying a text as "anything that carries meaning and that could be 'read' by an audience,"¹¹ as well as any sequential printed or written words.

4 Crystal, D. *Language Death*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 3–4.

5 Carey, P. 2004. *African Graphic Systems*. Durban: Durban Institute of Technology (unpublished MTech dissertation).

6 Mafundikwa, S. *Afrikan Alphabets: the Story of Writing in Afrika*. (New York: Mark Batty Publisher, 2004).

7 Dugast, I. & Jeffreys, M.D.W. 1950. *L'Écriture des Bamum*. Paris: Mémoires de L'Institut Francais D'Afrique Noire.

8 Duarte Lopez (1591) quoted in Pieterse, J.N. *White on Black: Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture*. (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1992), 69.

9 Barthes, R. 1971. "From Work to Text". Available at: <http://homepage.newschool.edu/~quigley/vcs/barthes-wt.html> (2001) (accessed January 4, 2008).

10 R. Barthes, *Mythologies*. (London: Vintage, 1991).



Figure 3 (above)

The Luchazi of North-western Zambia and related peoples used a complex style of geometrical diagrams called Tusona. This example represents the cosmological relationship between God, Mankind, and the natural world.

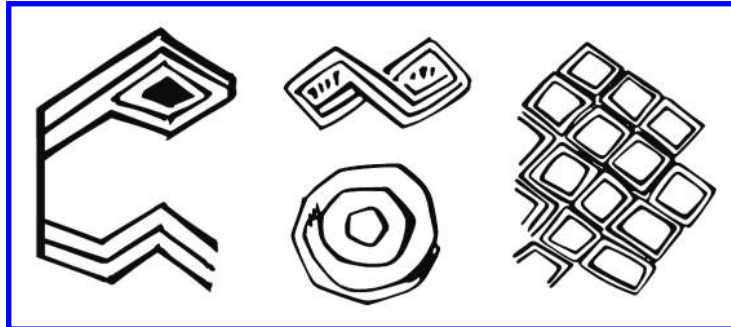


Figure 4 (right)

Chiefs of the Ndengese of the DRC used to wear scarified symbols and patterns such as these to represent their attributes and duties. The symbols and patterns were also carved on statues to represent the chief's authority.

African graphic systems can be examined in this light, but their use within the societies concerned is intended, as Faik-Nzujji (writing from within Congolese culture) makes clear, to convey a more specific, if not actually, monosemic meaning (Figure 4). In her discussion, the meanings are restricted to a limited and specific range of qualities related to the concept and exercise of chieftaincy.¹²

A graphic text might be described as limited to those forms that are produced by the use, within a particular culture or society, of a systematized group of conventionally rendered and recognized marks on a surface. The graphic systems and codes found throughout the African continent fit this definition.

Graphic design itself could then be defined as: the set of visual and technical skills required to render these marks both attractive and effective as communication in the society concerned. Using this definition, the history of graphic design should expand to cover all such mark systems, visual and technical skills, and relevant modes of communication throughout human history. Given the vast amount of material this understanding encompasses, selections would have to be made; but such selection could then be recognized for what it is, and the motivation for the selection could be made explicit. If an emphasis is then laid on graphic design for commercial or any other specific purposes, the bias inherent in such a decision would be more easily identified and, if necessary, contested. Students of the history of graphic design in different countries or cultures would then have a more consistent framework on which to base their selections.

This approach would be consistent with semiological theories of communication, which stress “the production and exchange of meanings”¹³ as defining the process. “Exchange” implies an equal, two-way process, which can only happen in a context of cultural understanding. Barnard¹⁴ describes communication as a “negotiation,” in which designers study a group’s beliefs, values, reactions—in other words, its culture—to communicate with the group. This definition further emphasizes the need for equality and understanding. Barnard also argues “that the study of communication is the study of culture, and that culture is the creation and use of meaningful forms, which would clearly include graphic design.”¹⁵ Thus, the interrelationship between graphic design,

11 I. Noble, & R. Bestley, *Visual Research – An introduction to Research Methods for Graphic Designers*. (Worthing: AVA Academia, 2005), 189.

12 C. Faik-Nzujji, *Symboles graphiques en Afrique noire*. (Paris: Editions Karthala, and Louvain-la-Neuve: CILTADE).

13 J. Fiske, 1990. Introduction to Communication Studies. (London: Routledge, 1990), 2.

14 M. Barnard, *Graphic Design as Communication*. (London: Routledge, 2005), 85.

culture, and communication, and the need to understand the first two to accomplish the third, is established.

According to this logic, African graphic systems are clearly situated in the history of graphic design. They embodied meaning in the culture that produced them, by graphic means. To the level it was culturally acceptable, these systems could be "read" by the "literate" in the given society, and so could communicate effectively according to their design. Their study is also important as one small means of validating the history of African societies and cultures and of helping to destroy the myth, still to be found in Western society, that Africa had no writing or history.

African societies are changing rapidly, with the result that many of these traditional systems have become extinct or devalued. However, even in such circumstances, their "ghosts" linger in contemporary societies and affect the society's understanding of the present. Where the culture has maintained the graphic or symbolic system, of course, the influence is easier to identify and work with, but even a dead system still has influence. The following example illustrates the potential usefulness of such graphic symbols in contemporary communication problems in one South African community.

Traditional Graphic Symbols and the AIDS Pandemic: The Siyazama Project

The HIV/AIDS infection rate in South Africa has been estimated to be between 10.2%¹⁶ and 18.8%,¹⁷ the latter equivalent to over nine million people. One authority has given the HIV infection rate among new registrations at one local hospital as being 70% to 80%,¹⁸ although the South African Department of Health claims the rate is 30.2%¹⁹ for pregnant women.

A number of publicity campaigns, such as "LoveLife" and "Soul City,"²⁰ have focused on various aspects of the pandemic. Unfortunately, it has yet to be shown that any of these broad campaigns have produced significant behavioral change in their intended audience. Most people in South Africa have been exposed to these campaigns and have known a number of HIV/AIDS casualties. Nevertheless, and perhaps because of contradictory government messages, high-risk sexual behavior remains widespread, particularly among those the country can least afford to lose: educated young adults, just entering employment. Keeton,²¹ reporting on a survey of current attitudes and a subsequent discussion of the findings among a group of young adults, seeks to explain, or at least make clear, the bizarre contradiction between awareness of risk factors and persistent high-risk behavior: "Infidelity was normal" (i.e., acceptable), the participants agreed, despite knowing the risks of multiple partners and despite the fact that 15% of the survey respondents had lost at least one family member to the disease.

- 15 M. Barnard, *Graphic Design as Communication*. (London: Routledge, 2005), 67.
- 16 UNAIDS (Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) and World Health Organisation (WHO)) 2006. *AIDS epidemic update: special report on HIV/AIDS: December 2006*. Geneva: UNAIDS. 11. Lowest estimate.
- 17 UNICEF. 2007. South Africa Statistics. Available from: http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/southafrica_statistics.html. 3. (accessed July, 11, 2007).
- 18 Hartzell, Dr. J. 2006. Personal conversation. July 18.
- 19 Department of Health South Africa (2006). *National HIV and syphilis antenatal prevalence survey, South Africa 2005*. Pretoria, Department of Health South Africa. Quoted in UNAIDS, 2006:11.
- 20 "LoveLife" is South Africa's national HIV prevention programme for youth, and can be found at www.lovelife.org.za. "Soul City," a broader youth/health organization, is at www.soulcity.org.za.
- 21 Keeton, C. 2007. "Is the Aids message getting through?" *Sunday Times* March 25-31. p6. Johannesburg: Johnnic Publishing.



Figure 5

A poster for an exhibition of the work of the Siyazama Project, showing the type of beaded dolls its members produce, representing traditional costumes of the Zulu people. Note the use of geometric representations of the AIDS ribbon on all three dolls (By permission of Dr. K. Wells/The Siyazama Project).

Although we still must hope that success will result, it is noteworthy that none of the campaigns I have seen sought to communicate with its intended audience on the symbolic level—the approach used by the Siyazama Project. Some have not even bothered to “communicate” in indigenous languages, even in parts of the country where English is almost completely unknown.

The Siyazama Project began in 1999 as a series of workshops specifically addressing the need to provide HIV/AIDS information to rural female bead-workers in the Valley of a Thousand Hills, the Inanda Valley, the Msinga region, and the Ndwedwe informal settlements, all in KwaZulu-Natal Province, South Africa. Thus, it was much more focused than the other campaigns mentioned. The project has demonstrated how visual communication can make a contribution in a community in which large numbers of people do not look to writing or print for their information.²² More specifically for this essay, it demonstrates how visual symbols that resonate with the indigenous cultural history can play a part in this communication process.

The project developed a collegial and friendly workshop ethos that allowed rural women to become comfortable seeking and expressing information about previously taboo sexual subjects, including HIV/AIDS and other STDs, abuse, and violence. It has enabled them to communicate this information to their communities through the visual medium of beaded dolls and tableaux. The use of a visual medium, in turn, has allowed expression of the issues to the wider society outside the workshops, which would still be taboo to discuss verbally.

A major visual motif in the various dolls and tableaux has been a geometrical version of the AIDS red ribbon. The ribbon was first used as a symbol of awareness and support in the HIV/AIDS struggle during 1991, in the United States, by organizations such as Visual AIDS, Broadway Cares, and Equity Fights AIDS.²³ Its use spread internationally, and by the mid- to late- 1990s, the ribbon was featured widely in South African AIDS campaigns and was becoming familiar in the South African context.

Because of the geometric design structure of most South African beadwork, such as that made in the Siyazama Project, the depiction of the ribbon became very stylized and geometrical, and even almost abstract (Figure 5). Abstracted or stylized versions of the ribbon have also become common in the various South African AIDS campaigns. The ribbon itself, or a realistic rendering of it, is not so common, which suggests that the two-dimensional graphic device is what has taken hold in the local culture. This traction might have resulted simply from the repetition of a more easily reproduced version of the symbol, but it seems likely that it results from its cultural resonance.

The cultural resonance refers to a system or group of traditional graphic symbols used by the amaZulu and other South

22 For more information, see: Wells, K., Sienaert, E., & Conolly, J. 2004. The Siyazama Project: a Traditional Beadwork and AIDS Intervention Programme. *Design Issues*, 20:2, 73–89. Spring 2004. (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press;) and Wells, K. 2006. *Manipulating Metaphors: A Study of Rural Craft as a Medium for Communicating on AIDS and Confronting Culture in KwaZulu-Natal*. Durban: University of KwaZulu-Natal. Unpublished Doctoral Thesis.

23 Avert.org. History of AIDS from 1987 to 1992. Available from: http://www.avert.org/his87_92.htm. (accessed November, 9, 2007).

Figure 6 (right)
Examples of the pictographs described by Mutwa as “Bantu symbol writing” (1998:664).

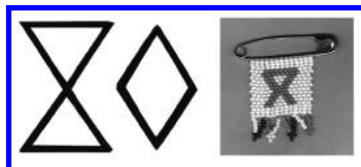
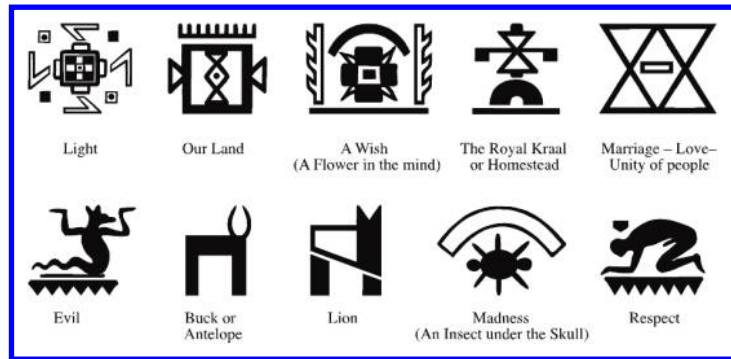


Figure 7 (above)
The Zulu Male (left) and Female (right) signs. Compare their structure with examples of the geometric version of the AIDS ribbon as used in Zulu beadwork in Figure 5.

African peoples. Credo Mutwa has described “Bantu Symbol Writing” as having once been widespread among the black peoples of sub-equatorial Africa but as having “died out fast as the people learned the European alphabet.”²⁴ He gives approximately 250 symbols that cover a wide range of meanings, some presented in the form of short texts, others as lists of related concepts. All are linear in execution but vary in style: Some are completely abstract; some are simplified pictorial or pictographic representations; some resemble the angular geometric style of Ndebele house decorations (Figure 6).

How many of these symbols are widely understood today is not known, but some clearly do still have currency in isiZulu-speaking culture. They are familiar to many, particularly in the more remote rural areas, where the population remains substantially separate from Westernized South African culture.

In particular, the symbols for “man” and “woman” are still known. The conventionalized and geometricized version of the AIDS ribbon, used as a logo in many South African AIDS campaigns, shows a clear and fortuitous visual relationship with the male and female symbols (Figure 7). This resemblance, Wells believes, is a substantial factor in the widespread acceptance of the graphic version of the AIDS ribbon and its preference over the three-dimensional version or its more realistic representation.²⁵

This cultural resonance with an older but not quite forgotten visual tradition is particularly important for large numbers of rural people, such as the women of the Siyazama Project. Many of the women are illiterate and speak only isiZulu and thus are excluded from most communication by written or print means. In this society, information is typically communicated orally and in social settings, but women are further constrained by cultural traditions from seeking or expressing information about sexual matters. They are thus doubly excluded from information and counseling about AIDS.

The Siyazama Project workshops encouraged the expression of concerns initially through non-verbal, three-dimensional forms of communication: the dolls and tableaux. Awareness and use of the AIDS ribbon/logo was encouraged, but again, it was the stylized,

24 Mutwa, C. 1998. *Indaba, My Children*. Edinburgh: Canongate Books (First published 1964). 664.

25 Wells, K. 2006. Personal conversation, August 14.

graphic version that the women preferred, rather than trying to make, for example, three-dimensional bead versions.

According to Kate Wells, combining elements of both male and female, and thus symbolizing their union, with all its joy and pain, allowed the AIDS symbol in this context to “convey a profound message of life and death, thus effectively triggering awareness of AIDS, promoting care for the sick, and encouraging behavioral change.”²⁶ Few of its products are considered to be traditional graphic design, but Siyazama’s process has communicated the AIDS issues successfully with the bead-working women. Virtually every product of the project incorporates the symbol, and it is broadly understood as a significant element within the overall AIDS message. The women’s improved understanding of the epidemic and its associated risk factors has been shown in their three-dimensional illustrations of the various events and issues. Nevertheless, understanding unfortunately has not enabled them to protect themselves better, because of the unequal, traditional power relations surrounding issues of sexuality.²⁷

Research has yet to establish the extent to which the effect of this particular symbol could be repeated and expanded across South Africa, either with other symbols or, farther afield, using other systems—or whether this was just a lucky coincidence. What has become clear is that the availability of a symbol that resonates with the audience, and that the audience is able to adapt and assimilate on its own terms, has made a huge difference in the effectiveness of the communication process developed in the project.

This case study is just one example of the use in design of symbolism and social concepts that may be unfamiliar to Western (or Westernized) designers, and it could well be repeated many times. If designers, particularly in Africa, wish to communicate with communities or peoples for whom such concepts or symbolism are not only familiar but natural, understanding and valuing the symbols and systems, as well as the cultures from which they spring, becomes vital.

Given the “Western” emphasis of most South African graphic design, only a conscious effort by both the profession and the graphic design educators, as well as intentional research of the several cultures with which they might work in South Africa, can lead to this level of communication. Designers and students do engage in research for particular projects, but this kind of research typically is not written up systematically or published. For example, no graphic communication literature has as yet been located that deals with the visual culture as a whole of either traditional or contemporary indigenous cultures in South Africa.

Such a process can only begin if both the education and experience of the designers engage with these cultures. In graphic design education, because of the complete practical domination of the discipline by Western technology, the emphasis is likely to

26 Wells, K., Sienaert, E., & Conolly, J. 2004. The Siyazama Project: a Traditional Beadwork and AIDS Intervention Programme. *Design Issues*. 20(2). pp73–89. Spring 2004. Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press. 75.

27 Wells, K. 2006. Personal conversation August 14.

be on history and theory. A history of graphic design or visual communication for South Africa might thus include not simply the visual traditions of the pre-colonial indigenous societies, or the development of “Westernized” graphic design in the country, but also the range of accommodations and adaptations made between the two types of tradition over time. Given the dearth of existing literature, extensive research will be required.

Conclusion

This article has discussed the case for indigenous African graphic systems as appropriate subject matter for the history of graphic design in South Africa. It has examined the relationship between certain Zulu traditional symbols, the AIDS symbol, and the social context in which the Siyazama Project has taken place. It proposes that a more culturally equal relationship between designer and audience, based on cultural respect and knowledge, actually produces a more effective form of communication than is the current norm. Such a relationship can help to promote a reevaluation of indigenous cultures, including languages that are currently under threat from globalization. This relationship is likely to develop among designers only if their experience includes research and study of both historical and contemporary aspects of all South African visual traditions, including the languages and cultures in which they are embedded. This broad scope is therefore proposed as the aim of graphic design history in South Africa, using the Siyazama project to illustrate an investigation of the effectiveness of this type of graphic symbol.

Finally, it must be suggested that the relationship between designer and audience, reflecting as it does the gap in cultural power between dominant and marginalized elements in South African society, is likely to remain unequal; however, both partners may strive toward each other’s position. The marginalized may adapt, subvert, or appropriate communication material or processes for their own use, but the sheer volume of output from the globalized cultural media makes it extremely difficult for them to relate equally with designers or other cultural producers. This appropriation is possibly the only way for them to gain or maintain some level of control over their cultures, but until this independent control is developed and sustainable, equal relationships between designers and marginalized audiences are likely to remain extremely rare.